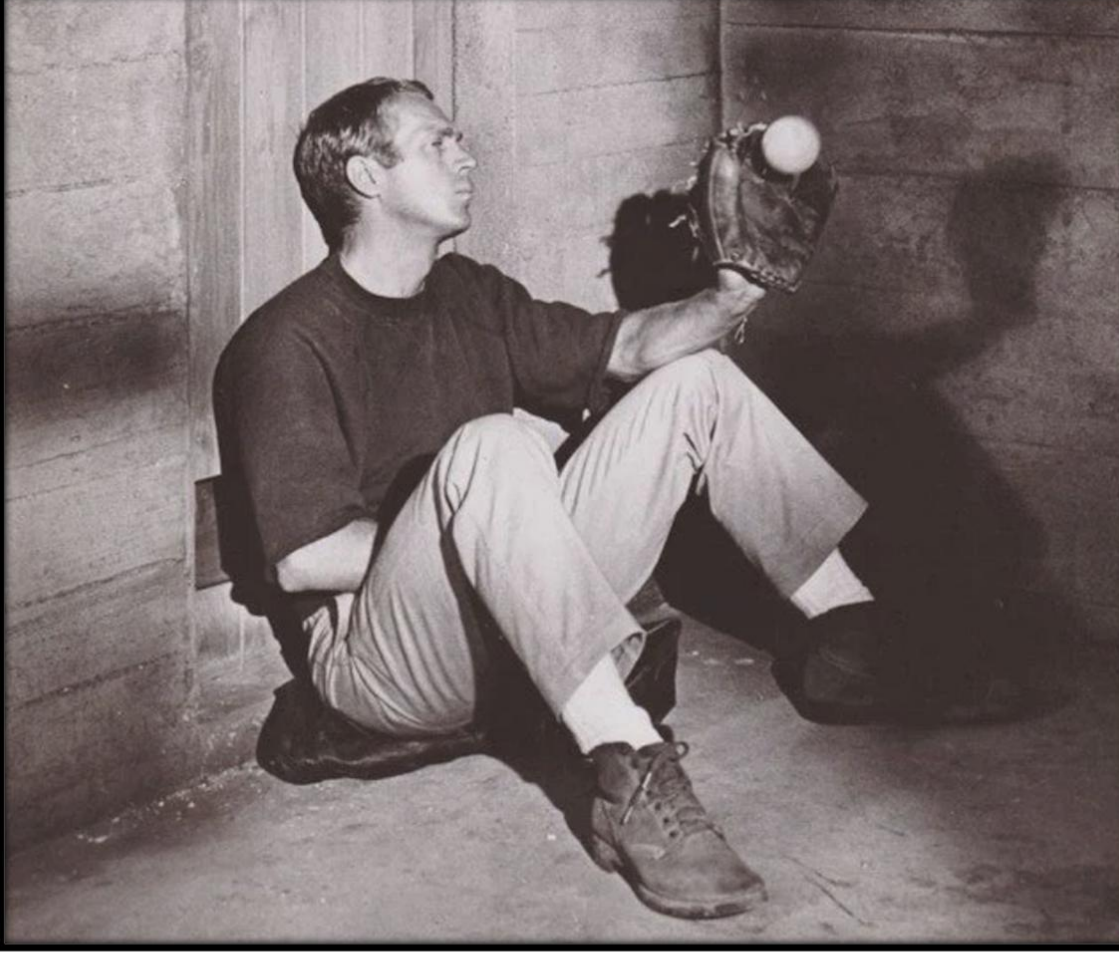

MR BARNARD GOES TO PRISON

Alba Pratalia

MR BARNARD GOES TO PRISON

By Alba Pratalia

Chapter One: Monday, 8:04 a.m.

[Interior – Juvenile Detention Center, Classroom C-2. Desks. Concrete walls. One flickering light overhead. The air smells faintly of industrial disinfectant and burnt toast.]

[Thirteen boys sit, spread out in the room like chess pieces someone gave up on. No shackles. No shouting. Just slumped shoulders, quiet fidgets, the occasional cough. Ages range from twelve to seventeen. A couple with fresh acne, one with a mustache that's more ambition than fact. Hooded eyes. Watchful. Not hostile. Just… used to things happening *to* them.]

[Their skin tones span the human spectrum's southern hemisphere. Chocolate, cinnamon, copper, café con leche, and combinations no Pantone chart bothers to print. No one comments on this. No one needs to. It's how

the room always ends up looking. Strange, isn't it? How justice always selects from the same palette? But hey—*must be coincidence.*]

[The clock clicks.]

[Door opens.]

[Enter: **Mr. Barnard.**
Corduroy jacket. Elbow patches. Satchel. Disdain. The air of a man who once set a bishop on fire in protest and somehow got tenure from it.
He scans the room as if checking for mold.]

BARNARD:
Did you know there's a whole branch of science called *excavation engineering*?

[He begins whistling **"The Great Escape"**—Elmer Bernstein's theme, slow and deliberate. Walks over to the board, slaps a taped photo of

Steve McQueen on a Triumph motorcycle, just before the barbed wire.]

BARNARD:

This man. An icon. Not because he escaped—

[turns to the class with a conspiratorial smile]

—*that's illegal*.

But because he understood soil mechanics.

[Click. PowerPoint slide 1: *"MINING ENGINEERING 501: SOIL MASS BEHAVIOR & CAVITY STABILITY"*]

BARNARD:

Welcome to your first *science* lecture, gentlemen. Today: **Bulking Factors**.

The volume ratio between in-situ soil and its disturbed, fluffy, diggable cousin.

Why do we care?

Because when you move dirt—*in a legal, state-approved, geotechnical context*—you must

know how much more space it'll take up.
Otherwise you run out of buckets. Or tunnels.
I mean… *potholes*.

[Click. Slide 2: Diagram of wooden shoring in tunnels.]

BARNARD:

Now this—*timber support*. When dealing with unconsolidated soil or aggressive back-pressure, these beams resist collapse. They also squeak if something's about to fail.
Which is helpful.
In case you're... building an ambitious vegetable cellar beneath your grandma's shed.

[Click. Slide 3: Tool-ground interaction and energy efficiency.]

BARNARD:

Tool-ground interface. This is where things get sexy. The contact zone between your shovel

and Mother Earth.

Too much force—you lose time.

Too little—you get nowhere.

Precision, boys. It's all about the rhythm. The angle. The pressure.

[He winks.]

Just like poetry. Or other rhythm-based activities I'll leave to your imagination.

[He turns. Puts the chalk down.]

BARNARD:

Everything we discuss today is science.

Engineering. Physics.

Nothing more.

Certainly nothing about escape.

God forbid.

[Beat.]

BARNARD:

Now. Who can calculate the volume increase of

clay when excavated dry versus saturated?

Anyone?

No?

Then you're useless in a high-stakes dirt-removal scenario.

Let's fix that.

[Whistling resumes.]

[Slide 4: "Assignment 1: Draw a full section of a temporary tunnel with proper safety timbering. Label all stress points. Bonus if it fits under a bunk bed."]

WEEK TWO

[Classroom C-2. Monday, 8:03 a.m. The projector is already humming. Mr. Barnard stands by it, sipping black coffee from a chipped mug that says "I dig dirt." The Steve McQueen photo now wears a tiny paper hard hat.]

BARNARD:

Gentlemen. Today we deepen the shaft of knowledge.

Three topics. All absolutely unrelated to any notions of tunneling out of places you're *legally mandated to remain inside*.

Got it?

Good.

Slide 1: Tunnel Boring Machines (TBMs) and EPB Technology

[Image: a massive Earth Pressure Balance TBM emerging heroically from a completed metro line.]

BARNARD:

Behold. The mechanical worm that eats its way through geology.

A Tunnel Boring Machine. Specifically, an

Earth Pressure Balance (EPB) model.

Its job?

Maintain equilibrium at the tunnel face to prevent collapse.

How? By injecting pressurized muck—yes, that's the technical term—back into the cutterhead chamber, adjusting soil pressure in real time.

Like... a digestive system that reverse-chews.

[He pauses, sips coffee.]

BARNARD:

This is important if, say, you're tunneling beneath a *heavily monitored* facility where sudden soil settlement might trigger... I don't know, **alarms**.

Which of course—*we're not*.

Slide 2: Forepoling – Preemptive Ground Support

[Image: medieval-looking schematic of spiked beams angled forward like jousting lances.]

BARNARD:

Forepoling. Sounds like an obscure kink or a Norwegian death metal band.
But no. It's a method of stabilizing loose ground *before* it collapses.
You drive spiles—steel rods or timber—into the face ahead of excavation.
Create a kind of umbrella. Keeps the overhead from eating your skull.

[He glances at the class.]

BARNARD:

Now, let's say—and I'm spitballing here—you were building a tunnel under... a kitchen.
You'd want that ceiling to stay in place.

No chefs falling through. No soup on the floor.

So what do you use?

Forepoling.

Protects lives. Prevents lawsuits.

Science.

Slide 3: Jet Grouting with Cooking Starch

[Image: diagram of a narrow lance injecting fluid into unstable soil.]

BARNARD:

Ah, now we get to the pantry.

Jet grouting. A technique where high-pressure fluid—often cementitious slurry—is injected to strengthen ground.

But here's the twist: in constrained environments, where heat, smell, or chemical traces might raise suspicion...

Some engineers—mad geniuses—use **modified cooking starch**.

Yes. Cornstarch. Potato starch. That crap your aunt thickens gravy with.

Mixed with water and binding agents, it creates a gel-like matrix that reinforces weak soils.
Low heat signature. Low odor.
Totally edible, in case of emergency.

BARNARD:

So. To recap:

- You balance face pressure to avoid collapse.
- You forepole to pre-stabilize uncertain ground.

- You starch-grout when you want plausible deniability and a bonus pudding.

Homework:

Design a soil-reinforcement strategy for a shallow tunnel through soft silty clay, beneath a facility with *strict noise restrictions.*
Use EPB parameters. Include forepoling diagram. Bonus if you include dessert.

[He picks up a carrot and chews slowly.]

BARNARD:

Remember:

This is science.

Not a rehearsal.

Not a plan.

Definitely not the third act of *The Shawshank Redemption*.

Now open your notebooks.

We're going underground.

WEEK THREE

Topic: Workplace Safety — The Tactical Way

Title Slide: "When HAZOP Meets Krav Maga: Creating a Safe, Smooth Digging Environment"

[The projector flickers. The lights dim. A dramatic gong plays. Mr. Barnard stands to the side, arms crossed, waiting for the cue.]

BARNARD:

Class.

Safety. The State says it's about hard hats, toe-caps, fluorescent vests, and incident forms.

And sure, yes, not being crushed by a collapsing shaft is *objectively pleasant*.

But there's another form of risk. The kind they *don't* put on the checklist.

Unwanted visits.

Interruption. Surveillance. Guards who "just happen" to do their rounds off-schedule.

What do we do when our site is *disturbed?*

We call the expert.

Please welcome… our guest speaker.

[Door opens. Enter: Mr. Stevens.

Small man. Bald patch. Wide, friendly smile.

Ill-fitting apron. Clip-on tie.

Carries a tray of homemade mini-quiches.

He waddles in like someone's sweet uncle who's terrible with technology and excellent at slicing carrots.]

BARNARD:

Gentlemen. This is Mr. Stevens. Head of Catering.

Absokutely not (despite stunning physical resemblance), Sgt David Neckbreaker

Mentalovich, drill instructor of Krav Maga fighting.

(That's a nickname from the kitchen. No one knows why. Probably a joke.)

Today he'll demonstrate *preventative workplace safety.*

MR. STEVENS:

[cheerfully, in a singsong voice]

Now boys, listen close. Rule number one: *keep your workstation tidy*.

Rule number two: *always know who's behind you.*

[He steps behind a dummy made of mop handles and a hoodie.]

And rule number three—

[He moves impossibly fast, twisting the mop-dummy into a pretzel with one hand and balancing a quiche on its head with the other.]

—neutralize disruptions without damaging infrastructure.

[The boys blink. One applauds slowly.]

MR. STEVENS:

Very good! Now, while you're shoring the sides of your little... uh... practice shafts, you may encounter *visitors.*

They might say they're guards.

They might be bored. Or nosy.

Or maybe just want to check on your *moral development*.

You do not *hit*.

You do not *fight*.

You *escort*.

[Gives a warm smile.]

Swiftly. Quietly. With maximum ergonomic efficiency.

[He demonstrates twelve pressure points on Barnard, who narrates calmly while being twisted.]

BARNARD:

Observe:

– Sternocleidomastoid distraction.

– Tracheal rebalancing.

– Voluntary nap induction.

All safe. All silent. All OSHA-adjacent.

[He pops back upright.]

MR. STEVENS:

And now, a nice recipe!

Today's special: *Tunnel-Edge Tabbouleh*.

Hydrating. Easy to digest. Won't slow your reflexes.

Page four in the booklet.

[He hands out laminated cards with martial arts diagrams on one side and snack recipes on the other.]

BARNARD:

Homework:

- Draft a HAZOP sheet for your current soil displacement project.
- Identify all critical risks, including *dynamic human factors*.
- Describe your non-lethal intervention plan using only ingredients available in a standard kitchen.

MR. STEVENS:

And remember, boys—
Safety is just another word for not being caught.

[He winks. The lights come back on. The quiches are mysteriously gone.]

CLASS OBJECTIVE: MET.
MORALE: UNSETTLINGLY HIGH.
SURVEILLANCE RISK: MINIMIZED.

WEEK FOUR – FINAL SESSION
Slide Title: "Course Wrap-Up: Incident-Response and Emergency Egress Protocols"
[Mr. Barnard stands at the front. Same cardigan. Same unreadable expression. Behind him, the screen glows.]

BARNARD:
Our short course ends here.
You've been exemplary students.
Bright. Curious. Alarmingly talented in structural analysis and applied subterfuge.
But sadly, all good things must be *interrupted by guards with clipboards.*

[Click. New slide.]

[Projected: Full facility topography in UTM coordinates, three-dimensional rendering, annotated.]

BARNARD:

Now, in the **purely hypothetical** event of an *incident*—say, a surprise lockdown breach—Please be advised: emergency exits are located *here*—[points]—*here*—[points again]—and *here*.

[Each location labeled with NATO phonetics:
ALPHA – Northwest service tunnel, behind laundry.
BRAVO – Abandoned utilities shaft, south quadrant.
CHARLIE – Main drainage line, covered by steel grate #14B, second yard.]

[Each dot pulses softly in red. Gridlines glow. Coordinates, bearings, elevation, soil type, and estimated crawl times noted in fine print.]

BARNARD:

Naturally, these exits are intended *only* for staff and contractors with appropriate clearance.
And should *under no circumstances* be used by underage individuals under State custody, even if they happen to be alone, unsupervised, and, say, inspired.

[He changes slide.]

Slide: A table of estimated pressure thresholds for HVAC ductwork and soil resistance levels per quadrant.

BARNARD:

This data? Just to complete the syllabus.
You're engineers now.
And engineers *always* know their environment.

Every vent, every pipe, every bolt.

Even if they never, *ever* touch them.

Right?

[He looks at them. Nods once.]

BARNARD:

You've passed.

No certificates. No applause.

Just knowledge.

[Beat.]

BARNARD:

Oh—and do remember:

If anyone asks what you learned here, the answer is "soil behavior under applied stress."

Which is true.

Emotionally and geotechnically.

[He pulls the Steve McQueen photo off the board, folds it gently, tucks it into his satchel.]

BARNARD:

Class dismissed.

Smooth **totally hypothetical** digging, boys.

[Lights stay dim. The projector keeps humming. Somewhere in the background: faint whistling of *The Great Escape*. Again.]

[A MONTH LATER]

[FADE IN – NEWS BROADCAST]

BREAKING: MASSIVE ESCAPE FROM STATE JUVENILE CORRECTIONAL FACILITY.

MULTIPLE YOUTHS VANISH.

AUTHORITIES "BAFFLED." SOME BELIEVED TO HAVE SWUM ACROSS FRISCO BAY—POSSIBLY TO ALCATRAZ.

WITNESSES REPORT "UNUSUAL

TOURIST BEHAVIOR." FBI SAYS: NO COMMENT.

[CUT TO – EMPTY CLASSROOM C-2]

Chairs still bolted. Whiteboard wiped clean. Only one item remains: a hand-drawn tunnel cross-section taped above the trash can, labeled "FOR EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES ONLY."

[CUT TO – BARNARD]

[Empty office. Silence. Mr. Barnard sits against a concrete wall. He holds a ball. No expression.]

BARNARD:

Throws the ball, just like Steve McQueen in the cell in The Great Escape.
[Softly. Rhythmically. No one around.]

Floor. Wall. Catch.
Floor. Wall. Catch.

[MUSIC FADES IN – Elmer Bernstein's *The Great Escape* march]

[CUT TO – SERIES OF SHOTS, ONE BY ONE]

"WHERE ARE THEY NOW"

- JAYDEN

  Helmet. Parka. Pickaxe.

  "Yukon Territory. Licensed Prospector. Dug 11kg of gold ore last winter. Lives in a shipping container with a sauna."

- DANIEL

  Hard hat. Tunneling rig.

  "Eurotunnel 2 Project. Senior Geotech. His section never leaked. Locals call him 'Mole King.'"

- AMEENA

  Lecture hall. Smart glasses. A chalkboard behind her reads: *"Today:*

Slurry Pressure and Face Stabilization."
"Assistant Professor, Underground
Works, Colorado School of Mines.
Wears steel-toe heels."

- ELIAS & KIKO

  Nighttime. Torches. Hooded jumpsuits.
  They crash *into* a medieval dungeon cell.

  Chateau d'if.

  Inside: Edmond Dantès and Abbé Faria, blinking.
  Elias: "Took us a while. We started from Marseille."
  Faria: "My God… they did it."

[CUT TO – BARNARD. STILL.]

Ball hits floor.

Then wall.

Then palm.

Floor. Wall. Catch.

[TEXT ON SCREEN]

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY: "FOR CRYING OUT LOUD, STOP INCARCERATING KIDS."

[MUSIC FADES IN – Elmer Bernstein's *The Great Escape Final Credits* - CREDITS ROLL – WITH MUGSHOTS ON LEFT, MODERN PHOTOS ON RIGHT.]

All the kids.

Then.

Now.

Names. Crimes. Sentences.

Followed by titles, jobs, dream projects, books published, kids they now teach.

[LAST FRAME]

Ball in motion. Mid-air.

Just about to hit the wall.

[MUSIC STOPS.]

BLACK SCREEN.

[ONE FINAL TEXT:]

"Not all who dig are lost."

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY:
"FOR CRYING OUT LOUD,
STOP INCARCERATING KIDS.“

"Not all who dig are lost."

Mr Barnard teaches soil mechanics. To children. In prison.

He says it’s about bulking factors, face pressure, and tunnel stability. He says it’s science. He says it’s not about escape.

The state gave him a chalkboard. He gave them PowerPoint slides, Krav Maga, and plausible deniability. Also: Steve McQueen.

By week four, his students can quote slurry injection rates and dismantle a ventilation shaft blindfolded. For educational purposes only, of course.

This is a story about engineering. But also about hope disguised as homework. And freedom—dug inch by inch, beneath the concrete floor.

If you’ve ever believed that knowledge can break chains—
this book hands you the shovel.